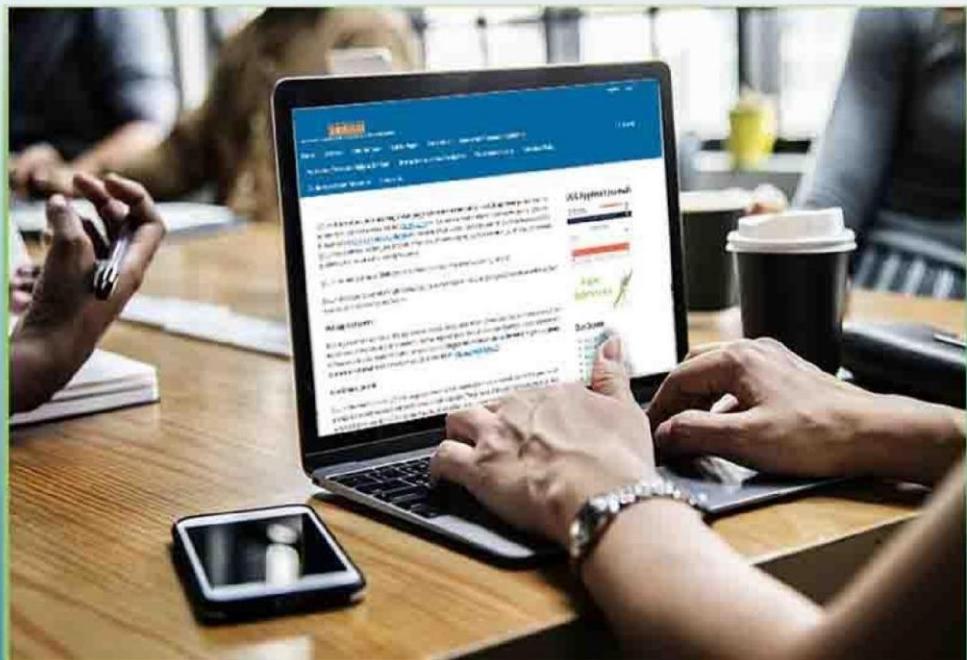


ISSN : 2395 – 5155

# IJOHMN

**International Journal online of Humanities**



**Volume 5, Issue 3, June 2019**

[www.ijohmn.com](http://www.ijohmn.com)

## Historicity of Ecocriticism and Ecocritical History: An Introductory Overview

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### Abstract

Overlapping and interconnected, interdisciplinary and heterogeneous, amorphous and multi-layered, and deep and broad as it is, countless topics on ecoliterature make ecocriticism a comprehensive catchall term that proposes to look at a text--be it social, cultural, political, religious, or scientific--from naturalist perspectives and moves us from “the community of literature to the larger biospheric community which [...] we belong to even as we are destroying it” (William Rueckert).

As I was in the middle of writing and researching for this article, I was struck by a piece of nature writing by an eleven year old sixth grader born to his (South Asian and American) mixed parents, both affiliated with Johns Hopkins and already proud to belong to the extended family of a Nobel Laureate in Physics. The young boy, Rizwan Thorne-Lyman, wrote, as his science story project, an incredibly beautiful essay, “A Day in the Life of the Amazon Rainforest.” Reading about the rainforest was one of his interests, I was told. In describing the day-long activities of birds and animals among the tall trees and small plants, the 2 pp.-long narrative actually captures the eternally continuing natural cycle of the Amazon. The budding naturalist’s neat classification of the wild life into producers (leafy fruit and flowering plants and trees), consumers (caimans/crocodiles, leafcutter ants, capuchin monkey), predators

(macaws, harpy eagles, jaguars, green anaconda), decomposers (worms, fungi and bacteria), parasites (phorid flies) and scavengers (millipedes) was found to be unforgettably impressive.

Also the organization of the essay into the Amazon's mutually benefitting and organically functioning flora and fauna during the day--sunrise, midday, and sunset--was unmistakably striking. I congratulated him as an aspiring environmentalist specializing in rain forest. I encouraged him that he should try to get his essay published in a popular magazine like Reader's Digest (published did he get in no time indeed!<sup>1</sup>) and that he should also read about (and visit) Borneo in Southeast Asia, home to other great biodiverse rainforests of the world. I called him "soft names" as a future Greenpeace and Environmental Protection leader and theorist, a soonto-be close friend of Al Gore's. The promising boy's understanding, however short, of the Amazon ecology and ecosystem and the biological phenomena of its living organisms was really amazing. His essay reminded me of other famous nature writings, especially those by Fiona Macleod (see below), that are the pleasure of those interested in the ecocriticism of the literature of place--dooryards, backyards, outdoors, open fields, parks and farms, fields and pastures, and different kinds of other wildernesses.

Wikipedia entries and scholarly publications in hundreds of books and thousands of articles on ecocritical and environmental studies of literature and culture demonstrate how vast and various these and the related topics are. Overlapping and interconnected, interdisciplinary and heterogeneous, amorphous and multi-layered, and deep and broad as they are, countless topics on ecoliterature make ecocriticism a comprehensive catchall term that proposes to look at a text--be it social, cultural, political, religious, or scientific--from naturalist perspectives and moves us from "the community of literature to the larger biospheric community which [...] we belong to even as we are destroying it" (William Rueckert). Having evolved and progressed through a number of waves or phases from the start, ecocriticism covers all the diffuse issues from "the ecologically adapted modes of production" (Donald Worster) to assumptions about

nature, biology, geography, environmental history, and environmental advocacies (Nancy Cook) to our environmental concerns and practices that “promote the well-being of the earth” to how nature, wild or sparse, is perceived in literary texts and introduced into literary discussions about gender, sexuality, politics, economics, ethnicity, and nationalism (Stephanie Sarver). Sarver proceeds to say that “environmental issues are human issues, and that our reverence for nature—both textual and actual—is not [...] a convenient excuse to avoid the problems of the human world.”<sup>2</sup>

Although ecocriticism is about the written texts, not scientific disciplines, it is necessary to understand the term more clearly by having a preliminary idea about what are generally known as ecology and ecosystem in modern biological sciences. Briefly speaking, an ecosystem is a community of both living (biotic) and non-living (abiotic--soil, mud, water, sunlight, air, cloud) things interacting with each other and their larger physical environment. It consists of communities of interdependent organisms inhabiting a common environment as their housekeeping niche, biome, biosphere, or hydrosphere. Ecology is a branch of biology that deals with the interrelationships between organisms (plants, birds, animals, and insects) and their natural habitat. In other words, ecology is the scientific study of biologically diverse ecosystems, complexly variable and unstable through time, weather and seasons. Human ecology, it follows, is a study of human organism in relationship with other biological organisms in their mutually inclusive habitat, be it parasitical or symbiotic. Keeping with time and technology, there has been a growth of environmental studies that is:

a multidisciplinary academic field which systematically studies human interaction with the environment [and] brings together the principles of the physical sciences, commerce, economics and social sciences so as to solve contemporary environmental problems. It is a broad field of study that includes the natural environment, the built environment, and the sets of relationships between them. The field encompasses study in basic principles of ecology and environmental

science, as well as associated subjects such as ethics, geography, anthropology, policy, politics, urban planning, law, economics, philosophy, sociology and social justice, planning, pollution control and natural resource management.<sup>3</sup>

Ecocriticism, perhaps the latest in modern critical vocabulary, is the study of literature in relation to nature, ecology and environment. It is an examination of the possible connections made in a text among the notions of place, people, self, society, and, certainly, the physical natural system, including the geographical and geological aspects of the earth. Variously called literary ecology, ecotheory, ecoliterature, ecopoetry, ecopoetics, ecocomposition, ecoconsciousness, green writing, and green studies, literature and the environment and their variations, ecocriticism is a demonstration of how the sense of biology, biopolitics, environmentalism, pastoralism, living spaces, and ergonomic designs informs the works of literature. “Put as simply and loosely as possible,” in the view of Ian Marshall, ecocriticism is “literary criticism informed by ecological awareness [that] means either scientific or spiritual recognition of the interconnections of living things, including humans, with each other and with their environment.” According to Jonathan Culler (author of *Literary Theory: A Very*

*Short Introduction*), ecocriticism has potential to bring change to society: “Most narrowly, it is the study of literary representations of nature and the environment and the changing values associated with them, especially evocations of nature that might inspire changes in attitude and behavior.”<sup>4</sup> Pippa Marland refers to ecocriticism as an umbrella term that embraces “a range of critical approaches that explore the representation in literature (and other cultural forms) of the relationship between the human and the non-human, largely from the perspective of anxieties around humanity’s destructive impact of the biosphere” (my emphases).<sup>5</sup>

Ecocritical or environmental criticism may have originated from exactly the same anxieties: modern issues of life-affecting global warming, desertification, deforestation, inappropriate agriculture, and the human-caused damage and degradation to natural environment (or the looming threats of such crises) causing the green peace, climate change, conservation, recycling drives, and animal rights movements going forward. It may also have been prompted the cyclical renewal, regeneration and revitalization in nature from idyllic, rural and rustic to urban and residential landscapes to remote wilderness and seascapes. All this paves the way for Ursula Heise's idea of a "world citizenship" based on everyone's connection to earth as against global capitalism and climate change.

Recent decades have consequently seen the "save the earth" movements, following the ecological imbalances, decreasing biodiversity, and the destructive effect, that is, pollution resulting from urbanization, industrialization, and technological mechanization at the cost of nature. These are among the most important issues facing the countries and communities today, far and near, developed and underdeveloped, or desert and fertile. Considering the global scale of the widely talked-about environmental crisis, the United Nations has been regularly organizing international conferences to address the problem of climate change and help the nations meet the challenges thereof. Green movements promoting conservation of plants and animals and protesting environmentally destructive technology have for years proved to be politically effective pressure groups in today's world politics. It is in this context of earthliness that ecocriticism has emerged as a prominent mode of literary criticism and critical theory. It is now an integral part of both literature studies and environmental humanities that, after Rueckert, deals with,

[...] the web of relationships between cultural products and nature and expressing cultural and literary critiques from an environmentally political perspective. Objects of study include texts, poems, plays, and, increasingly, visual productions like films and artwork. While the ecocritical

approaches to these formats are diverse, a common and constant goal is to eliminate the dichotomy between nature and society. As such, ecocritics deconstruct topics encompassing, for example, the dearth of adequate responses to environmental crises, the neglecting of environmental concerns, and romanticized conceptions of nature. Environmental justice and ethics also provide platforms for ecocriticism.<sup>6</sup>

In exactly the same way, Thomas K. Dean defines ecocriticism as “a study of culture and cultural products (art works, writings, scientific theories, etc.) that is in some way connected with the human relationship to the natural world.” He explains in great details: Eco-criticism is also a response to needs, problems, or crises, depending on one's perception of urgency. First, eco-criticism is a response to the need for humanistic understanding of our relationships with the natural world in an age of environmental destruction. In large part, environmental crises are a result of humanity's disconnection from the natural world, brought about not only by increasing technology but also by particularization; that is, a mentality of specialization that fails to recognize the interconnectedness of all things. In terms of the academy, eco-criticism is thus a response to scholarly specialization that has gone out of control; eco-criticism seeks to reattach scholars to each other and scholarship to the real concerns of the world. Inherently, then, eco-criticism is interdisciplinary. In order to understand the connectedness of all things—including the life of the mind and the life of the earth—one must reconnect the disciplines that have become sundered through over-specialization. Inherent in the idea of interdisciplinarity is the wholistic ideal. Therefore, eco-criticism must remain "a big tent"—comprehensiveness of perspectives must be encouraged and honored. All eco-critical efforts are pieces of a comprehensive continuum. Ecocritical approaches, thus, can be theoretical, historical, pedagogical, analytical, psychological, rhetorical, and on and on, including combinations of the above. As a response to felt needs and real crises, and as an inherently wholistic practice,

ecocriticism also has an inherent ideological if not moral component. A wholistic view of the universe is a value-centered one that honors the interconnectedness of things. As the interconnectedness of things is valued, so too is the integrity of all things, be they creatures of the earth, critical practices, spiritual beliefs, or ethnic backgrounds. For example, as ecocriticism invites all perspectives into its tent in order to understand the human relationship to the universe, the philosophies and understandings of different ethnic groups will be shared by all. Eco-criticism can be, for individuals who choose to make it so, socially activist or even spiritual. While some may criticize eco-criticism for being undisciplined because of such comprehensiveness, it is that very wholistic view that marks it off from the particularized critical approaches of the past that have led to the types of disconnections that eco-criticism seeks to heal. Although eco-criticism can touch virtually any discipline, when it translates into action, it generally comes back to its home ground--the human relationship with the earth. Eco-criticism, then, can be, but need not be, politically active, as it advocates for an understanding of the world that works to heal the environmental wounds humans have inflicted upon it (my emphases).<sup>7</sup>

In his essay, "The Land Ethic," published posthumously in *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), a classic text of the environmental movement, Aldo Leopold distinguishes his ecologically based ethic from the economics-based, utilitarian-based, libertarian-based, and egalitarian-based land ethics. He proposes that land ethic should include nonhuman members of the biotic community following the basic principle that "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise." His land ethic "expands the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively, the land. It changes the role of the humans from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellowmembers, and also respect for the community as such."<sup>8</sup> Followed by Rachel Carson and Lynn

White in the early 1960s,<sup>9</sup> Edward Paul Abbey (1970s and ‘80s), Joseph Meeker (1972), Norman Maclean (author of *A River Runs Through It*, 1976), Rueckert (1978), Raymond

Williams (his essay “Ideas of Nature” and his book *The Country and the City*, among his other great publications during 1970s and 1980s), John Elder (1985), and William Cronon (1980s), countless critics and writers have contributed to establishing the term in the critical canon and the related studies during the last three to four decades.<sup>10</sup> What Cronon, a noted environmental historian, says, in a concise and compact manner -- that “human acts occur within a network of relationships, processes, and systems that are as ecological as they are cultural” —lies at the heart of literary ecology and could very well be applied to analyze all strands and shades of its practice.

Noted for his advocacy of environmental issues, criticism of public land policies, and opposition to anthropocentrism, Abbey “wanted to preserve the wilderness as a refuge for humans and believed that modernization was making us forget what was truly important in life.” He had differences with mainstream environmentalist groups on what he thought were their unacceptable compromises and his works played a significant role in the creation of the radical *Earth First!*<sup>11</sup> This is close to Marland’s idea of “deep ecology” that “challenges the anthropocentrism [...] and the kind of ‘shallow ecological’ standpoints that see the natural world as merely a resource for humanity and that presuppose that human needs and demands override other considerations. In other words, deep ecologists believe that taking care of our environmental problems first will in-turn solve our society problems. The second strand that we must familiarize ourselves with is “social ecology”. A reverse of deep ecology, social ecologists suggest we must first address our social inequalities before remedying the environment.”<sup>12</sup>

(Abbey's and Marland's radical views will find a mediation below as they do in Serenella Iovino's suggestion of dissolution of "the traditional binaries [humans vs. animals, humans vs. nature] and thus extend closer towards eco-egalitarianism.")

Since the Western Literature Association Meeting of 1989 in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, when the term ecocriticism was first adopted to refer to the critical field of "the study of nature writing" (thanks to then a graduate student at Cornell, Cheryll Glotfelty, who proposed and was then seconded by WLA's then Past President Professor Glen Love in his speech, entitled "Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Literary Criticism"), the field of ecocritical theory and practice took its roots only to grow and flourish since. The 1994 WLA Meeting Salt Lake City, Utah--6 October 1994 with ecocriticism as a major item on the agenda just confirmed that and helped the latter take a long step forward to develop into a widely accepted critical theory today. It is now a solidly established critical theory or tool in its own merit, institutionalized through a number of professional bodies and journals such as *Ecozon@: European Journal of Literature, Culture and Environment; The Journal of Ecocriticism; Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism; Indian Journal of Ecocriticism*; and, perhaps more importantly, The Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) and its *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* that became a quarterly journal in 2009, published in conjunction with Oxford University Press.

Literary studies are traditionally dominated by discussions of literary movements, literary style of a work, its aesthetic quality, historical value, meaning, point of view, language, and its treatment of race, class, gender, history, politics, and other universally accepted themes such as love and religion. All such discussions are ultimately social, material, utilitarian and anthropocentric.. While these are all practical and politically correct, they are, unlike ecocriticism, neither biocentric nor land-based nor driven by a notion of the environmental ethic.

. Partly in reaction to the prevailing packages of literary criticism, ecocritics' position is to project the apparently non-historical ecocriticism as something with its own boundary, sufficiently attentive to the "leaves of grass" and "the rolling earth," (with its "Air, soil, water, fire," "Sunshine, storm, cold, heat," "From the open countenances of animals or from inanimate things,/ From the landscape or waters or from the exquisite apparition of the sky"), to refer to Whitman's poems by those names, markedly different from the canonically established critical discourses. One of the four ways of looking at ecocriticism by Stan Tag is

Whitman's way as proclaimed in *A Song of the Rolling Earth*:

I swear the earth shall surely be complete to him or her who shall be complete,  
 The earth remains jagged and broken only to him or her who remains jagged and broken.  
 I swear there is no greatness or power that does not emulate those of the earth, There  
 can be no theory of any account unless it corroborate the theory of the earth, No  
 politics, song, religion, behavior, or what not, is of account, unless it compare with the  
 amplitude of the earth,

Unless it face the exactness, vitality, impartiality, rectitude of the earth. (my emphases)

Tag's first way—the way of Whitman--is also his second.<sup>13</sup> Recounting the story of a student watching a hillside change from winter to spring, from "a clump of kinked, dead-looking sticks" into "a full bouquet of wiry branches weighted with mini-pineapples," that is, to a bushy place full of lilac plants and flowers, buds and leaves, Tag explains that students need to,

[...] explore the natural world firsthand. To read the earth--carefully, closely, and often; to pay attention to its rhythms, patterns, intricacy. Students need to get to know the earth, not just discuss it. Such outdoor experiences will enliven their reading of books, and even sharpen their thinking and writing. It means creating assignments that get students out of the classroom, or

that challenge students to study any given subject within the larger contexts of their campus environments, their towns, watersheds, continents, planet. We must give students time and space to experience the natural world.”

Emphasizing the importance of field trips to open places by students and scholars alike, as Tag does, Scheese also underlines the need “to trace the historical evolution of a place, to get the feel of a particular environment.” He goes on to say: “Like an anthropologist we should engage in fieldwork; our informant is the land itself. Outdoor education goes hand-in-hand with ecocriticism because we and our students need to be reminded regularly that the earth was not made for humans alone. There's no such thing as ‘bad weather.’” As stated by Glotfelty, “ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies, rather than an anthropomorphic or human-centered approach.”<sup>14</sup> In common with other critics such as Worster, Christopher Cokinos, and Kent Ryden that ecocriticism actually takes an ethical stance, away from mere aestheticism and anthropocentrism, Glotfelty gathers that ecocritics should begin by asking questions such as “What cross-fertilization is possible between literary studies and environmental discourse in related disciplines such as history, philosophy, psychology, art history, and ethics?” She goes on asserting that:

Despite the broad scope of inquiry and disparate levels of sophistication, all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts, language and literature [...] we must conclude that literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but, rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system, in which energy, matter, and ideas interact. Most ecocritical work shares a common motivation: the troubling awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the

planet's basic life support systems. This awareness sparks a sincere desire to contribute to environmental restoration (my emphases).<sup>15</sup>

Glen Love's essay, "Reevaluating Nature: Toward an Ecological Criticism," aims to deconstruct human-centered scholarship and advocates a revaluation of nature in literature, away from an

"ego-consciousness" to an "eco-consciousness."<sup>16</sup> Cokinos points out that ecocriticism prefers not to privilege language-centered literary theory and is fundamentally ethical (like feminism is at its best) and brings to the fore both human and nonhuman nature that are there in the world of a text.<sup>17</sup>

Looking for a balance or compromise among the different forms of ecocriticism, David Taylor defines ecocriticism as "a broad term that groups very disparate types of criticism." One type is polemical in so much as it distances itself from the text as no more than a linguistic structure, self-sufficient and self-contained, or as a work of merely aesthetic beauty, or as merely depicting human society and human values. Its main interest lies in the physical terrain of the land itself and then in the cultural constructions of environment and human descriptions of an actual landscape. Yet another type such as New Criticism is opposite and also polemical in being solely textual and language-centered, based on the close reading of a literary work. In

New Criticism's style of interpretation, according to Terry Eagleton (in light of his *Literary Theory: An Introduction*), meaning is thought to be "public and objective, inscribed in the very language of the literary text, not a question of some putative ghostly impulse in a long-dead author's head, or the arbitrary private significances a reader might attach to his words. [It] ignores the milieu in which the text is read, the historical concerns of and influences on the author, and, of course, the cultural background of the reader." While ecocriticism does not disapprove of cultural critique and historical backgrounds, New Criticism by its very definition does. Both ecocriticism and New Criticism are, however, disinterested in New Historicism,

anthropocentrism, and aesthetic viewpoints.

Neil Evernden's *The Social Creation of Nature* (1992), as the title suggests, presents ecocriticism not as a separate or isolated species of criticism as the rigid and exclusively earthbound critics plans to do, but as interdisciplinary in scope and approach.. According to Evernden, "Nature is as much a social entity as a physical one. In addition to the physical resources to be harnessed and transformed, it consists of a domain of norms that may be called upon in defense of certain social ideals. In exploring the consequences of conventional understandings of nature, [the book] also seeks a way around the limitations of a socially created nature in order to defend what is actually imperiled [...]."<sup>18</sup> In a similar vein, Don Scheese considers ecostudies "inherently political" the way, as she mentions, Judith Fetterley considers feminism to be political. Not strictly separating ecocriticism from other critical stances such as the aesthetic view and, having much in common with other critics, Scheese attempts to integrate between (1) nature writing and the historicizing literary/critical theories, (2) real nature and "the post-modernist claim that nature is a social and psychological construct," and (3) ecocriticism and the aesthetic and anthropomorphic considerations. Like many others, Scheese also is asking the ecocritics to be tolerant of their critics. He believes one could benefit from and be informed by interpretations from diverse points of view and so rejects or excludes nothing from the equation because he thinks "all writing is anthropocentric in that it must be filtered through a human consciousness." In common with others, he shares with us

that:

One of the startling discoveries I have made in teaching nature writing over the years is of the broad community of scholars across the disciplines who regularly incorporate the literature of place in their courses. Ecocriticism is most appropriately applied to a work in which the landscape itself is a dominant character, when a significant interaction occurs between author and place, character(s) and place. Landscape by definition includes the non-human elements of

place--the rocks, soil, trees, plants, rivers, animals, air--as well as human perceptions and modifications. How an author sees and describes these elements relates to geological, botanical, zoological, meteorological, ecological, as well as aesthetic, social, and psychological, considerations (my emphases).<sup>19</sup>

Using the term ecoliterature again and again alongside ecocriticism, Allison B. Wallace observes that “Writing that examines and invites intimate human experience of place's myriad ingredients: weather, climate, flora, fauna, soil, air, water, rocks, minerals, fire and ice, as well as all the marks there of human history.” According to her, ecocriticism must work to make writing about place prominent in all disciplines, not just English. All fields of academic study, Wallace argues, “concentrate on human life, on the one hand, or nonhuman life, on the other, [and] rarely do they make any significant marriage between the two their aim. Ecocriticism stands poised to integrate the field that does--ecoliterature--into virtually all the standard disciplines. Why should this matter? Because this kind of reading points to human participation in nature that enriches and enlarges the mind and spirit; because our best hope for our imperiled places lies in this imaginative involvement, as readers and as agents of change, insofar as it fosters in us a sense of sympathy and belonging” (my emphases).<sup>20</sup>

In accord with the majority of mainstream ecocritics, Mark Schlenz also seeks to bring ecocriticism into “dynamic interconnection with worlds we all live in-- inescapably social and material worlds in which issues of race, class, and gender inevitably intersect in complex and multi-faceted ways with issues of natural resource exploitation and conservation.” So does Scott Slovic, who while taking into cognizance the place of human consciousness in a threatened natural world, argues that “Literary scholarship and literature itself are, on the most fundamental level, associated with human values and attitudes” from which critics cannot just shy away. Like the above, Tag’s third way of looking at ecocriticism is its interdisciplinary aspect as fleshed out in the following:

When we study the relationships between language and landscape, text and terrain, or words and woods, we are not studying two separate things (as if we lived in some dualistic universe), but interdependencies [...] each interconnected to the other, and both wholly dependent upon such basic natural elements for their survival as sunlight, water, and air. No literary theory would be worth a whit if the sun burnt out tomorrow [...] Ecocritical scholarship also needs to be interdisciplinary. Just as a healthy ecosystem depends upon a diversity of plant and animal life, healthy ecocriticism depends upon a diversity of viewpoints and perspectives. A fully ecological analysis of any text can only happen within a community of readings (my emphases). Quoting Don Elgin from *The Comedy of the Fantastic* (1985) in support of his view, Tag

continues:

It means investigating the manner in which politics, economics, science, religion, language, medicine, and countless other matters go into the making of a piece of literature. It means trying to see the whole, and the whole is so enormous and complex that the temptation is to retreat to the comfort of specialized knowledge, information that is reassuring precisely because it has simplified the world to the point at which it can be understood.

Tag's third way as above is interwoven with his fourth, which is Thoreau's —“The universe is larger than our views of it.” Looking to mediate between ecocriticism and other kinds of criticisms, David W. Teague finds convergence saying, “We'd do well to impart to ecocriticism some of the energy and sophistication that other critical movements--Marxism, feminism, civil rights movement--have in the past few decades brought to bear on literature.” Citing the example of the March 1994 volume of American Quarterly that is devoted to the discussion of American suburbs and that addresses, using sociological methodology, “the questions of land-use, gender, race, class, and, significantly, reading,” Teague asks, “Can we apply similar paradigms in our endeavor to make the study of literature and environment more relevant to our students' experiences?”<sup>21</sup>

Since there is hardly any creative writing that is conceivable without some kind of setting in the enlivening and actually life-sustaining external nature that shields and shelters the human element in its bosom, almost all literary works, in all genres, including folk-andfairy tales, deeply and meaningfully lend themselves to diverse ecocritical interpretations. They do not yield to the same extent to other critical modes. No other theories—Marxist, Structuralist, Deconstructionist, New Historicist, New Critical, Feminist—would apply as aptly and suitably as ecocriticism does to a large body of literary texts. As just stated, since the majority of literature, as an artistic and/or realistic representation of life (be it a novel, a play, a poem, or even a war poem or an epic narrative of adventure) invariably and indispensably lies in the lap of nature, nothing seems to fall outside the scope of biological and environmental discourse about both the human and nonhuman presences in a text.

As such, ecocritics exploring the relationship between the two worlds, human and natural, find that Adam and Eve walking through the Garden of Eden and committing their act of disobedience by eating the forbidden fruit that led to their fall from God's grace and then covering their shame by fig leaves available are environmentally situated in their natural surroundings, regardless of how divinely Edenic their situation was. Critics also find

Odysseus's homeward voyage,<sup>22</sup> (for that matter, Coleridge's Ancient Mariner's and Melville's Captain Ahab's voyages across the oceans), Oedipus's dry and barren ("cursed") land in ancient Thebes, and Lear's ("commodified") up-for-grab land in ancient Britain and the stormy heath he is exposed to in the process of his realizing the hard reality of truth<sup>23</sup> are all within the framework of ecological heritage. So are Hardy's Egdon Heath,<sup>24</sup> Willa Cather's Prairies, J C Van Dyke's Colorado Deserts, Abbey's Glen and Grand Canyons, and James Fenimore Cooper's American frontier. All these are conceived with a profound ecocritical consciousness out of the natural world and its literary representation. All such landscapes are

“as crucial to and as formative of” the characters in the literary works concerned as “the cityscapes of Don Passos, James, or Baldwin.”

The Garden of Eden is an original and archetypal lovely spot (locus amoenus) of which kind there are many (loci amoeni) in literature to provide a way for peace, pleasure or solace for pain—physical or spiritual. For example, there is the forest and the river by which the fallen Hester Prynne walks at night along with her daughter, the forest walk playing a significant role in her life of reflection and determination in Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*. The sufferings of the love triangle--Dorigen, Arveragus and Aurelius—in Chaucer’s *The Franklin’s Tale* are balanced by a description of the obstructing black rocks on the coast of Brittany, reminding the readers of the storms, moors, and seashores in *Twelfth Night*, *The Tempest*, and *King Lear*.

There is the Forest of Arden in *As You Like It*, Athenian woods in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, “mighty oaks” in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Birnam Wood of oaks in *Macbeth*, ancient

Druid oak groves, the wood with a large oak in Coleridge’s *Christabel*, and Frost’s woods, “lovely, dark and deep” on a snowy evening, yet deflecting him forward toward keeping his promises miles away. In his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), Thomas Jefferson would describe the natural environment as “The Natural bridge, the most sublime of Nature’s works.”

Sometimes a woody place would provide for a strategic location for a military general to launch an attack from as the Iraqi/Kurdish Saladin did during the Third Crusade (1189-1192) when he started a full-scale assault against Richard I’s (Richard the Lionheart’s) forces from a wooded spot in the Battle of Arsuf. Likewise, in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, Macbeth is told by the supernatural agents that he will only be defeated when the Great Birnam Wood comes to his Dunsinane hill. Later, his enemy Macduff’s soldiers come through the Birnam Wood and each soldier cuts a large branch to shield himself, so that when the enemy forces move, it looks as if

the Birnam wood moves only to have Macbeth defeated and killed. As stated by Ralph W. Black, any book having trees in it bears suggestions of woods and forests and other forms of wilderness carries profound ecological implications, and, therefore, should be on the environmental literature reading list. "If ecocriticism's territory," he says, "is the interplay of the human and the nonhuman in literary texts," almost all texts fall under the category of environmental literature.<sup>25</sup>

In May 2012, when I was teaching in Oman, I attended a conference in Canada to present a paper on Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*. During the conference I discovered that it was a paperless conference even without the brochure printed on paper. The reason was that the conference organizers would like, as a matter of commitment to their ecological ideal or principle, to save a tree by being as paperless as possible. The participants would have to check the schedule either online or at best from a few "paper" notices pasted on the wall at the venue.

An American participant was direct in pointing out that "Environment is their god," meaning the Canadians, whose Environment and Climate Change Canada is a huge Government Department "responsible for coordinating environmental policies and programs." Much larger than its American counterpart EPA (Environmental Protection Agency), Environment Canada makes its imposing ubiquitous appearance all across the country.

Both the conference and the Environment Canada, along with Julia Roberts' Mother Nature Conservation campaign, Harrison Ford's campaign that "Nature doesn't need people - people need nature; nature would survive the extinction of the human being and go on just fine, but human culture, human beings, cannot survive without nature," and the Belgium-based (originally of Madagascar) singer Lala Njava's "We need nature, but nature doesn't need us," were an eye-opener for me as far as the modern vast ecological study of literature is concerned. They were simply voicing the contemporary concerns about the increasing deforestation and

desertification, environmental deterioration, greenhouse gas emissions, nuclear race and the possibilities of further nuclear destruction (after WWII), residential degradation in the neighborhood, loss of an ecosystem caused by oil spill along the coastlines and the ecological imbalance created thereby, gradual decrease of biodiversity, and the alarming extinction or great dying of species. They were lending their support to the ongoing green peace movement, arguments for nuclear power as an environmental solution as against nuclear power as an environmental problem, demands for stricter pollution control laws and the prevention of noise/sound pollution, search for alternative sources of energy in ethanol, wind turbines, and solar and hydro power, bioethics, biotechnology, ergonomics, importance of clean water and pure and pristine natural surroundings everywhere.

Although I was coming across the ecology-related beautiful terms (mentioned above)—all very dear to me, I did not have a chance to deal with them as much as I would like. To my study of literature I applied in varying degrees other theories and –isms such as New Historicism, New Criticism, Reader-Response, the meaning of a text in the context of its first appearance in a volume that may sometimes be different from its later meaning in isolation or anthologized contexture, and the theory of misreading, originality, and anxiety of influence. However, although I was not up-to-date in my knowledge of ecocriticism, I briefly made use of it in my discussions of William Jones's ancient Arabian poetry, Wordsworth's "Arab Dream," Shelley's *Ozymandias* (all three in the context of the Arabian desert), and Byron's *Manfred*.<sup>26</sup> Since then I have developed a special liking for the ecological criticism and have been watching how it was becoming a fast expanding field of academic study. Literary ecology has become astonishingly wide and broad to embrace all examinations and investigations of literature and culture from the perspective of the coexistence and coordination of diverse species--living and nonliving, birds and animals, fish and fowl, plants and trees, fruits and flowers, oceans and mountains, and rivers and deserts. Rueckert who was the first to coin the term "ecocriticism"

argues for precisely the same -- a way “to find the grounds upon which the two communities—the human, the natural—can coexist, cooperate, and flourish in the biosphere.”<sup>27</sup>

In 1950s, Northrop Frye used the seasons in his archetypal patterns of criticism in which “each season is aligned with a literary genre: comedy with spring, romance with summer, tragedy with autumn, and satire with winter.”<sup>28</sup> In a way strikingly similar, Meeker, a pioneering ecocritic to first use the term “literary ecology,” present comedy and tragedy as ecological concepts reflecting “forces greater than that of humans.”<sup>29</sup> The two forms that have to do with survival, renewal, regeneration, death and destruction are analyzed as reflecting “forces greater than that of humans” and connecting “literary and environmental studies as a cohesive field of study.”

If this is all valid, which it indeed is, one can easily argue that an enthusiasm for an ecocentric green way of living and learning is innate, primitive and primordial. Associated with human life and existence from the beginning, a green impulse made its way into the creative imagination of the writers developing in them an environmental consciousness and a sense of environmental protection and conservation throughout history. In other words, there has been a cultivation of literary and pastoral ecology in their creative expression since the time of

Hesiod’s Works & Days, Aesop’s Fables, Theocritus’s Idylls, Roman Statesman Cato the Elder’s (234 BC to 149 BC) practical guide to farm management and husbandry De Agricultura (On Agriculture), and Virgil’s Georgics (that exalts the life and work of the farmer). Ibn Basslan, who was the head of the royal botanical gardens in Toledo and Seville, collected plants while returning to Spain from the Islamic Hajj pilgrimage in Mecca and wrote his Diwan alFilaha (Book on Agriculture) in the late 11th century. The English geographer Richard Hakluyt wrote on the value of plant introductions in the 1580s.

In this respect, Robert Sallares' *The Ecology of the Ancient Greek World* (1991) is "a pioneering study in historical population biology [offering] the first comprehensive ecological history of the ancient Greek world [and proposing] a new model for treating the relationship between the population and the land, centering on the distribution and abundance of living organisms."<sup>30</sup> It was in the same year that Max Oelschlaeger published his *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology* (1991) that examines the development of the concept of "wild nature" from the ancient times through Wordsworth and Coleridge.

In the majority of literary works, ancient or modern, there is a carefully chosen predominance of nature and the natural world as shown by a lively description of landscape either as a beatific background or a forensic foreground against the human drama taking place therein. Humans need nature and its tactile bosom to sustain their life and living just as they need the mother to be born. This leads us to ecofeminism, which, as a branch of ecocriticism, as pointed out by Marshall, is now "bigger than the rest of the tree." It "has critiqued," Culler says, "masculinist propensities to dominate nature rather than coexist with it." Seeking to dismantle the androcentric viewpoint of the environment and the male stranglehold on it, ecofeminists examine the patriarchal, hierarchical and gendered relationship between men and land. They argue that the land is controlled and dominated by men the way they control and dominate women. Men use and occupy the land as their property the way they do with regards to women, who are close to nature both biologically and emotionally. Nature can be represented as empowered or oppressed as women; parallels can be drawn between the treatment of the land in all its forms (residential, industrial, recreational, lakes, hills, mountains, valleys, water, birds and animals) and the sufferings of women, minorities, and immigrants. In "Refuge: An Unnatural History," Terry Tempest Williams records a conversation she had with her friend about men behaving domineeringly both towards women and environment as they were driving together:

We spoke of rage. Of women and landscape. How our bodies and the body of the earth have been mined. ‘It has everything to do with intimacy,’ I said. ‘Men define intimacy through their bodies. It is physical. They define intimacy with the land in the same way.’

‘Many men have forgotten what they are connected to,’ my friend added. ‘Subjugation of women and nature may be a loss of intimacy within themselves.’<sup>31</sup>

The ultra- or radical feminists do not seem to be comfortable with the idea of ecocriticism treating nature as all-patient, motherly, fertile, feminine, resourceful, giving birth, going through cycles, varying moods, swells and subsides, and bends and straights. They might like to see nature,—though they are as wily, strong, powerful, forceful, occasionally capricious, and always independent-minded as nature is—as a barren, yet seductive, voluptuous and reckless femme fatale only with a powerful sway of its own! All ecofeminists would, however, probably love to see what happens in the Irish dramatist J M Synge’s one-act play, *The Shadow of the Glen*. There is a homeless tramp, who hopes to rest for a night and mend his clothes at the home of Nora and her old farmer husband Dan Burke. The tramp tempts the young Nora away with an invitation to a life of simple pastoral attractions, saying (in lines 397-405, at the end of the play):

Come along with me now, lady of the house, and it's not my blather [babble, ramble, talking without sense] you'll be hearing only, but you'll be hearing the herons [long-legged freshwater and coastal birds] crying out over the black lakes, and you'll be hearing the grouse [a kind of bird] and the owls with them, and the larks [high-flying singing birds] and the big thrushes [also small singing birds] when the days are warm, and it's not from the like of them you'll be hearing a talk of getting old like Peggy Cavanagh [an old woman, emblem of Nora's future fate] and losing the hair off you, and the light of your eyes, but it's fine songs you'll be

hearing when the sun goes up, and there'll be no old fellow wheezing [Nora's old husband suffering from asthmatic coughing], the like of a sick sheep, close to your ear (my emphases and my insertions in parentheses).

Finding freedom from bondage at her dull white-haired husband's isolated cottage at the head of a glen, Nora goes away to live with the tramp in close contact with nature. Nora saves her life from boredom by being in the midst of open nature. It is both a comic and ironic environmental commentary that may be compared with what the tragic King Lear, along with his comic but wise Fool, learns and experiences in the stormy heath under the open sky.

Let me conclude with the words of Ryden, who further elaborates his understanding of the main subject as follows:

Ecocriticism, and the texts upon which ecocritical scholars focus, provide perhaps the most clear and compelling means we have of literally grounding the study of literature in the vital stuff of life--the earth that surrounds and sustains us. The ecocritical stance reconnects literary study to both the processes and the problems inherent in living on this heavily burdened planet, focusing our attention anew on the ground beneath our feet, on our complex relationship to that ground, and on the implications of our behavior toward that ground; it removes literary scholarship from the realm of rarified word games, from the endlessly self-reflecting hall of mirrors that comprises so much of contemporary criticism and makes it matter in human affairs (my emphases).<sup>32</sup>

Citing Wendell Berry and William Stafford, Ryden argues that the context of literature is not the "literary world" as such but that its "real habitat is the household and the community—that it can and does affect, even in practical ways, the life of a place—" and that "all events and experiences are local." Insisting on the place and its locality, Ryden claims that ecocriticism "demands that we listen to the stories that people tell about the land, that we examine how they

shape and have shaped the land [...], it demands that we be folklorists, geographers, historians, landscape readers, students of material culture [...]. Writings about nature and the landscape, and the interdisciplinary study of those writings, explore in its most basic form the intersection of art with the rhythms and textures of life on earth and, throughout that exploration, achieve a deeper resonance, raising fundamental ethical questions, demanding that we think carefully about how to live well and wisely. Criticism has no more important work than this (my emphases).

Due to global ecological crisis, there may indeed be a state of “interregnum” (a term that Fiona Macleod uses to suggest not a break, “no interregnum,” but a continuity in the life of nature even in deep winter around the Scottish shores) on the way. Nature has increasingly become “a silenced other,” necessitating that it be foregrounded in the human representations of it and that a portrayal of the harmonious relationship between the human and the natural be consistently made. A large part of literature has of course been devoted to doing precisely that kind of depiction for ages and centuries. The biocentric vision of poets and writers, as rightly pointed out by ecocritics, one after another (Jonathan Bate, Karl Kroeber, Lawrence Buell,

David McCracken, Onno Oerlemans, Scot Russel Sanders, Edward Sapir, Greg Gerrard, Gary Snyder, Kate Soper, Wilhelm Trampe, Dominic Head, William Howarth, Richard Kerridge, Joanna Cullen Brown, James McKusick, Keith Thomas, and Timothy Morton, among others) has made them focus on the interplay of the human and the nonhuman, seeing themselves “as fellow citizens with non-humans in the sylvan surroundings.” As a solution to the problems of technological mechanization, industrialization, and urbanization at the cost of nature, environmentally conscious literary texts suggest that since there cannot be a quick fix, politically or policy-wise, there should at least be a change in the human consciousness in terms of locating the place of humans in nature that would challenge the marginalization of ecological concerns and foreground the impact of ecosystems on life and language.

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[https://medium.com/@Nick\\_DeMott/a-brief-history-of-ecocriticism-a120614d30fc](https://medium.com/@Nick_DeMott/a-brief-history-of-ecocriticism-a120614d30fc)

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According to Frye in his "The Archetypes of Literature" (1951), "Comedy is aligned with spring because the genre of comedy is characterized by the birth of the hero, revival and resurrection. Also, spring symbolizes the defeat of winter and darkness. Romance

and summer are paired together because summer is the culmination of life in the seasonal calendar, and the romance genre culminates with some sort of triumph, usually a marriage. Autumn is the dying stage of the seasonal calendar, which parallels the tragedy genre because it is, above all, known for the "fall" or demise of the protagonist. Satire is metonymized with winter on the grounds that satire is a "dark" genre; satire is a disillusioned and mocking form of the three other genres. It is noted for its darkness, dissolution, the return of chaos, and the defeat of the heroic figure. Summer – Romance. The birth of the hero. Autumn – Tragedy. Movement towards the death or defeat of the hero. Winter – Irony/Satire. The hero is absent. Spring – Comedy. The rebirth of the hero. The context of a genre determines how a symbol or image is to be interpreted. Frye outlines five different spheres in his schema: human, animal, vegetation, mineral, and water. The comedic human world is representative of wish-fulfillment and being community centered. In contrast, the tragic human world is of isolation, tyranny, and the fallen hero. Animals in the comedic genres are docile and pastoral (e.g. sheep), while animals are predatory and hunters in the tragic (e.g. wolves). For the realm of vegetation, the comedic is, again, pastoral but also represented by gardens, parks, roses and lotuses. As for the tragic, vegetation is of a wild forest, or as being barren. Cities, a temple, or precious stones represent the comedic mineral realm. The tragic mineral realm is noted for being a desert, ruins, or "of sinister geometrical images" (Frye 1456). Lastly, the water realm is represented by rivers in the comedic. With the tragic, the seas, and especially floods, signify the water sphere."

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